

# Portland scales back commercial organics program

*By Bobby Elliott and Dan Leif, Resource Recycling*

*April 9, 2014*

A year from now businesses in the Portland, Oregon region will no longer be able to include compostable foodservice items alongside food scraps in commercial organics collection.

Metro, the regional government covering Oregon communities in the Portland metropolitan area, says a commercial organics program intended to make "something of value" from salvaged food scraps has been overwhelmed by non-food compostable items as well as prohibited material.

"We allowed a lot of stuff other than food in our organic stream and we're getting a lot more than we bargained for," Paul Ehinger, Metro's director of solid waste operations, told *Resource Recycling*. "We were getting all kinds of plastics, compostable and otherwise, and it's extraordinarily difficult on the floor of a transfer station to figure which are and which are not compostable. ... We were getting so much other stuff it became difficult to see even what the problem stuff in the loads [were]."

Originally, Metro's commercial organics contractor, Recology, was sending commercial food scraps, cardboard and compostable items to the firm's Nature's Needs facility in North Plains, just west of Portland.

The arrangement was short-lived, however, due to "significant odor problems" at the site. As a result, all of the material started going to JC Biomethane, an anaerobic digester in Junction City, Oregon, which is about 100 miles south of the metropolitan area.

JC Biomethane has recently complained about processing problems, leading Metro to scale back the commercial organics effort.

Notices were **sent out** on March 28 to approximately 1,000 businesses throughout the region that could be affected by the change. Citing overwhelming collection volumes of non-food items, such as cardboard and compostable cutlery, napkins and plates, the regional government argued focusing on just food scraps will ensure the program's longevity.

Starting in November, businesses will no longer be allowed to include cardboard with material destined for the anaerobic digester, and by March of 2015 the new regulations will go into full effect. BPI-certified bags and liners will still be allowed.

The change will not affect the city's residential organics program.

Buzz Chandler, the president of Stalk Market, a Portland-based company that is a major supplier of compostable foodservice items to markets across North America, said the move is a step backward for Portland. "To simply just give up like this, it seems like the wrong way to do it, especially when other cities are having success."

He noted officials in Seattle have been considering legislation that would ban non-compostable foodservice items at restaurants that offer take-out, a step that would encourage more compostable products to enter the commercial organics stream.

Stalk Market has a supplier contract with the Moda Center sports and events arena, which has been separating organic materials produced through concession food sales. It's unclear what steps Moda Center and other commercial establishments will need to take to keep similar programs running.

Ehinger says Portland businesses won't abandon ship on the idea of using alternatives to plastic and paper, but he acknowledges that it won't be easy. "For some businesses it will be a harder transition," Ehinger said.